

tor to shake. “But call me Rudy,” he grinned. “Everyone does.”

The tuxedoed man pointedly turned away, leaving the usher’s hand dangling in midair. “Isn’t that a coincidence,” the conductor sniffed. “Sharing the name of an eighteenth-century German composer.” He glared at the young man. “We feature his song cycle in our next set. Perhaps I’m wrong. Maybe you wrote those numbers?”

Wary defiance tugged at the usher’s mouth and hardened his eyes. He held out his arms. “Dance with me and I’ll tell you,” he offered.

The conductor backed away. “Get off this stage before I have you fired.”

Rudy Minglepuss threw back his shoulders, waved at the crowd, and ambled down the stairs like a prizefighter.

Adele rushed forward and threw her arms around him. “See? You’re a natural,” she cried. “They’ll remember you as the man with the barrel-chested voice.”

“Sure, kid,” he said awkwardly, slipping out of her embrace. “Happy to help.”

“Should I call you Rudy?”

He readjusted his boutonniere thoughtfully as he studied the girl. “Well,” he paused, clearing his throat. “The real name is Raul—Raul Mendoza,” he whispered and brought a finger to his lips. “Don’t tell, okay?” He looked back at the orchestra. “Close though, isn’t it? Same initials and all.” He shrugged. “Can’t fire me if he only knows about a red-faced guy with a mangled puss.” He grinned at last.

Raul stayed by Adele’s side, smoking a cigarette as the audience returned to their seats. Each time a passing ticket-holder acted like they knew him, bestowing grins and smiles of approval, he cast Adele a puzzled glance.

“Good thing I got lost,” she said. “Got you some fans.”

At last she spied her father making his way downstairs, walking arm in arm with her sister. He was holding a handkerchief to his mouth and coughed from the smoke. With evident relief, Adele ran up the steps. But he continued his descent until he reached Raul.

“Thank you,” he said, shaking the young man’s hand so vigorously he had to stop and take a breath. “That was kind of you.”

“Tell it to them, willya?” Raul asked, jerking a thumb in the direction of the orchestra.

With a tilt of his head, Simon Bonaventure searched the far edge of the stage. “It is already done,” he concluded.

Adele turned to see her mother leaning by the steps, deep in conversation with the matronly woman who had been adjusting Lily Pons’s special dress. Cecilia Bonaventure had enveloped the woman’s right hand with both of her own in a firm grip. The wardrobe supervisor nodded, surveyed the audience, and pointed directly at Adele.

“Her?” Raul protested. “She’s not in charge.”

Simon Bonaventure patted the usher on the cheek. “You are still quite young, aren’t you?” he laughed. He gathered his daughters into his arms and continued his trek towards the stage.

“Don’t forget,” Adele said, turning back to face Raul. “You made your debut on the same bill as Lily Pons.”

“Whatever you say, kiddo,” he replied doubtfully.

“You’re going to be famous,” she insisted.

“Yeah,” he called to their retreating figures. “You and me both.”

It was fine if he didn’t believe her. Adele would remember their exchange not as a farewell but a promise. The audience’s response was an elixir, more potent than any gin and tonic the two would later drink.

And the expression Raul Mendoza wore on his true, unmangled face? Laughter had drained the bitterness. He glowed, effervescent, and not from the spotlights but from the sequins. As Rudy Minglepuss, he stood before a sea of iridescent light, a thousand flecks so bright he was blinded. Leaving him to calculate what other things long abandoned and deemed worthless could return to circulation.

**Barbara Tannenbaum** is a freelance journalist and author based in San Rafael, California. Her nonfiction has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Salon.com*, and *San Francisco* magazine. This story is an excerpt from her recently completed novel, *The Uncrowned Queen of Magnetic Springs*.

## JOHN KILDUFF

*Above Zuma Beach, 2013*

Oil on canvas, 20 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST